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Budget-cutting Md. counties hear complaints within ranks

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To sign a 6-year-old up for the "Going Buggy!" summer camp at a Montgomery County park, where petting a three-inch cockroach is a possibility, parents can click on <http://parkPASS.org>, request a personal identification number and begin counting the days before barbecue-flavored mealworms are served to their aspiring entomologists.

But to sign a kid up for the "Bugs, Bugs, Bugs" summer camp at a county recreation center a few miles away, parents would need to click their way to <http://recweb.montgomerycountymd.gov> and register for a different six-digit PIN and a new customer number before getting on with their arthropods.

Unlike on television, or in much of the country, there is no Parks and Recreation Department in Montgomery. There's a Parks. And there's a Recreation. There are two budgets, two sets of employees, two directors, two registration Web sites.

The disconnect illustrates a challenge facing governments nationwide. Recession-battered budgets are prompting officials to scour their operations for costly redundancies. But few specimens can be as squirmy or elusive as the promise of saving money by eliminating bureaucratic overlap.

"Local governments are looking desperately to find ways to maintain services at the same or lower cost," said Ron Carlee, director of strategic initiatives at the International City/County Management Association. There is a new willingness to talk about consolidation and reach beyond political boundaries to share resources, he added, but a big asterisk remains.

"Mostly, it's a pain to do," said Carlee, a former Arlington County manager. "The control and autonomy question comes into play."

In a vast local government like Montgomery's, where even the scaled-back budget proposal tops \$4.3 billion, opportunities for savings are plentiful. Tradition, law and years of flush budgets have helped split Montgomery's government into fiefdoms handling similar tasks.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) proposes the size of the budget for each major area of county governance, including general services, public schools, Montgomery College and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The County Council

sets the final funding for each. But the schools and other agencies shape their own spending, which can cause repetition.

Digital divides

Take, for example, how Montgomery manages its data centers, the stacks of servers and vaults of digital information that direct or store everything from e-mail and Web traffic to backups of critical systems.

County agencies pay for five data centers. The general government facility is run by the executive branch. The school system, college, and the park and planning commission each have their own. There's also one for the Housing Opportunities Commission. They each pay for facilities, electricity and backup contracts.

"What we have here is 25 years of technological evolution," said Steven Emanuel, chief information officer for Montgomery's Department of Technology Services. Emanuel proposed a joint center, but the agencies haven't found \$50,000 for an initial analysis.

"It's technically possible," he said. "Now it's a matter of figuring out how to get it done."

With spending cuts pending on everything from social services to public schools, Montgomery officials say they're hungry to eliminate redundancy. But protectionist instincts remain powerful, and it's unclear how far elected leaders will get in pushing through major changes.

"This is probably the best chance we've had in my memory serving in local government," said Leggett, who was elected to the County Council in 1986. "If you can't do it in this climate, it's very unlikely you can do it in almost any other climate."

Ways to save

Leggett's office has found dozens of areas to mine for savings. Many cross traditional lines of authority. For instance, the public schools, county government and others fund a patchwork of benefits programs.

"We've got all these different pension programs out there, all these different health programs out here. Is it possible to have a uniform system that addresses all of the needs?" Leggett asked.

County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) has also proposed that the council's Office of Legislative Oversight study what's driving the county's steep yearly deficits in time for a new council to act after November's election.

Bearing down

Last month, at a meeting with procurement managers who oversee hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts, Floreen and council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) called for an immediate improvement in agency coordination. "We're out of time," Leventhal said.

Carlee said there have been notable successes, although some have taken years of groundwork. Fire departments in Fairfax and Arlington counties and in Alexandria respond to calls in neighboring jurisdictions if their stations are closer. "They found they could do their job better if they actually coordinated with each other. It was enlightened self-interest, but it worked," Carlee said.

Montgomery's Department of Recreation is in the executive branch. It is part of the park and planning commission, which was set up decades ago to provide some insulation on environmental and development issues involving long-term thinking and regional scope.

The parks have a police force and dispatch center separate from the county's Police Department, and Leggett said he is seeking savings there. A skate park in Olney built by the Parks Department has been staffed by Recreation. But Recreation's proposed budget includes no skateboarding money. Parks officials say they are analyzing whether it's feasible to keep it open.

A study by the Office of Legislative Oversight last year discussed consolidating the recreation programs from both into one department. It just didn't say which one. A political struggle ensued.

"I would think that Recreation would be a perfect programming arm for the Department of Parks," parks chief Mary Bradford said.

"Mary Bradford and I agree that a full merger makes sense," said Gabriel I. Albornoz, director of the Department of Recreation. "If there are more pros than cons with one of those scenarios, then I think that's the direction we need to take. But that analysis needs to be done."

The County Council aired some of the complexities but didn't force the issue. Officials said that it could cost nearly \$1 million just to combine databases of customers and other information. The departments have coordinated more closely but are still on their own.

"There are a thousand excuses for not consolidating," said Timothy L. Firestone, Montgomery's chief administrative officer. "It's much easier to go back to your turf and say, 'Oh, no -- don't touch this one.' "